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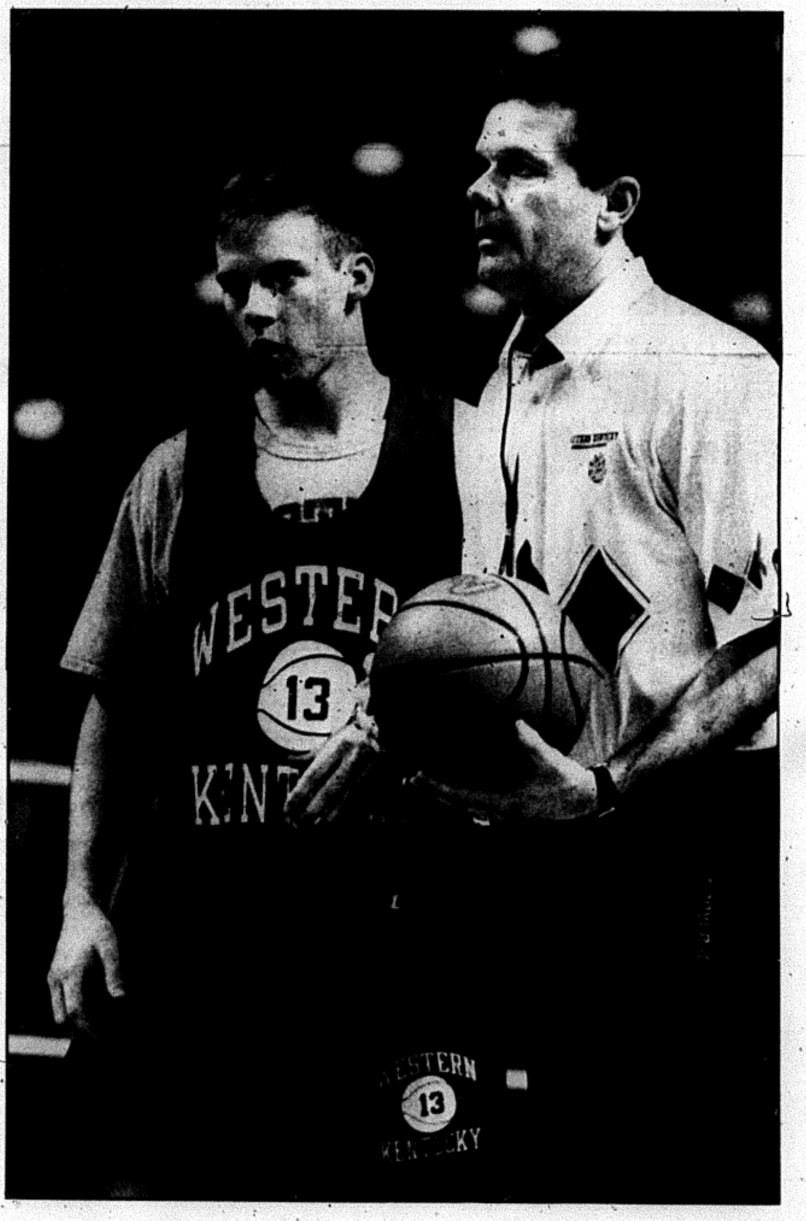
KEEPING THE BALANCE

COVER STORY: **They share the same last name, but during basketball season Coach Ralph Willard says freshman guard Kevin Willard is not his son. Both are careful to downplay family ties on the court.**



INSIDE: Fellow writers say Jim Wayne Miller has a gift, and the poet laureate shares it with students across the region.

Hillside

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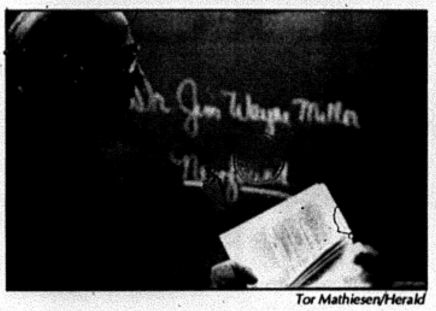
PAGE 6: At Western, he is a professor of German, but Jim Wayne Miller is much more. The Kentucky poet laureate travels the region showing others that writing is an art, and anyone can be an artist.



Tor Mathiesen/Herald

Jim Wayne Miller, a Kentucky poet laureate, reads to students at an Owensboro elementary school last week.

COVER PHOTO: On the road in Jonesboro, Ark., Friday evening, the men's basketball team practices at the home of the Arkansas State Indians. When the team is on the road, the relationship between Coach Ralph Willard and his son, Kevin, is strictly basketball.

Magazine editor: Jim Hannah

Photo editor: Tracey Steele

Look for the next Hillside in the March 29 issue of the Herald.

Also in March, look for stories about Women's History Month.

'DURING BASKETBALL SEASON, HE IS NOT MY SON'

STORY BY CARA ANNA

PHOTOS BY JAMAL A. WILSON

Years ago, Ralph Willard was just another dad, sharing taxi duty with his wife, Dottie, shuttling three kids here and there. He would watch his younger son Kevin excel at his first love, soccer. And when he coached, he would bring his children to the high school gym to play against the backdrop of their father's voice.

For several years, he held back his coaching career to be able to come home in the evening and see his growing family.

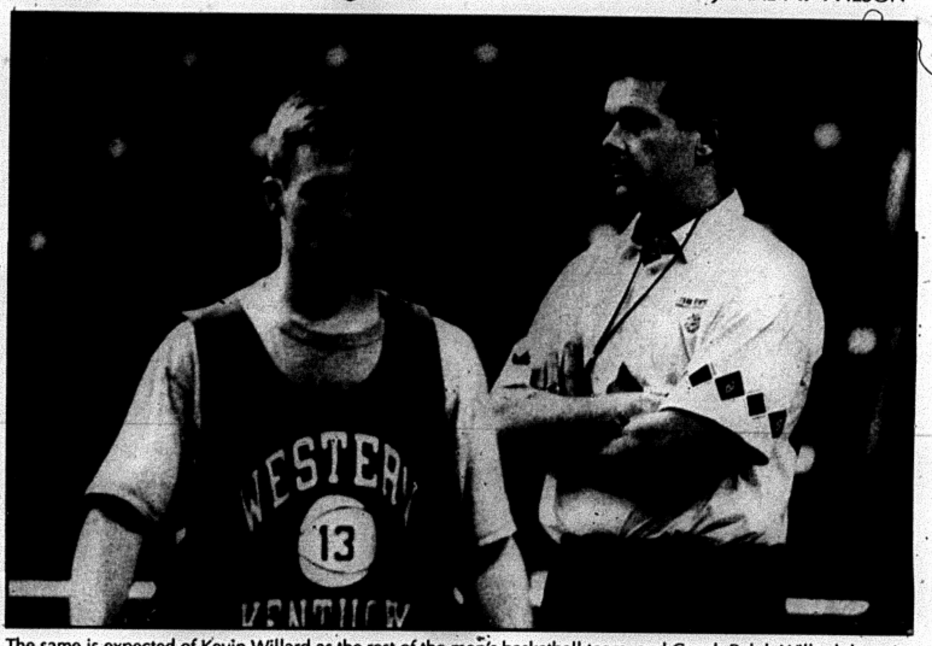
Then, once Kevin got old enough, Willard went to the next level — college ball.

And life changed. Suddenly Willard was no longer home. "It was a different environment — 'Dad's away, let's turn on the television and see if we can see him,'" Dottie said.

As Willard's career moved along, the family moved with him — from New York to Lexington, and from there to Bowling Green.

Here, for the first time, Willard was a college head coach, putting in days that sometimes lasted 20 hours.

But in another gym in town, Kevin Willard was working too, soon to join his father once again.



The same is expected of Kevin Willard as the rest of the men's basketball team, and Coach Ralph Willard doesn't hesitate to let him know when he's made a mistake.

◆

No longer is it a father-son relationship, though. Not this time of year.

On the court it's all business, and Kevin Willard is only a face among 13 faces, a freshman guard good for about 12 minutes and four points a game.

The day Kevin was born, Willard said, was the most emotional day in his life. Instead of sitting in the waiting room as he had done when his other two children arrived, he was there for the birth.

And within seconds, he was holding his son in his arms.

But almost 19 years have passed. Now, on these days in February, Kevin gets little more than a pat on the back.

"During basketball season, he is not my son," Willard said. "My caring has to be divided between 13 players."

That's okay, because during games, Kevin forgets Willard is his father.

The two see each other through the medium of basketball. They share locker rooms and film sessions, team prayers and travel plans.

It is a balance both work to uphold — the game which brings them together also keeps them apart.

◆

They are at opposite ends of the bench this night against Kansas State, and if you didn't know the team very well you would not guess they are father and son.

The father stands with his arms crossed, his face blank as he looks across the court.

The son is on his hands and knees on a towel, shouting at the players.

It would not work, though, to say that Ralph and Kevin Willard are opposites. They share everything from their New York background to their degree of intensity.

But they express themselves in different ways when it comes to basketball.

◆

Headphones on, Willard sits in the Blue Moose lounge at the Holiday Inn for his weekly radio show.

During a commercial break, he is urged, as usual, by a fan to "Smile, Coach!".

"I can't smile," he says, looking down, but he does smile a little.

His team has just lost to Jacksonville in Diddle Arena, a game that took the Hilltoppers out of first place in the Sun Belt Conference. In front of several thousand fans, Western gave up a 22-point lead in the second half and lost by nine.

Willard has not slept since then, and has watched that second half 10 times in two days.

"I keep thinking it did not

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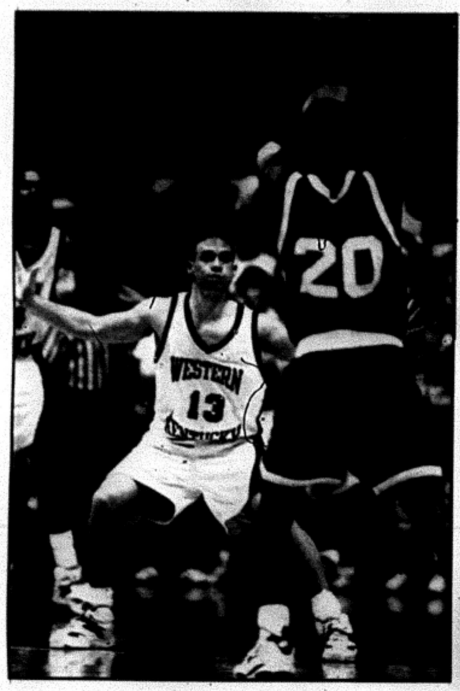
WILLARDS RARELY SEE EACH OTHER OFF THE COURT



Kevin Willard guards Kip Stone of Jacksonville. The Hilltoppers lost to the Dolphins 84-77.

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really happen to us," he tells his listeners.

He goes on to discuss the game and his team with callers, calmly.

"He's hard to read," said Wes Strader, who calls the men's games, hosts Willard's radio show and is a good friend of the coach. "Around here, we're used to being able to read people's expressions. You can't tell if he's happy, sad, mad by looking at him."

Later that night, Kevin responds in his own way to the Jacksonville loss. He dives after loose balls, shoulder squealing on the floor. He curses. He pulls his squad together under the basket — "Come here," he calls, then shouts, hurrying them along, "Come here!"

As practice ends, he takes the ball and slams it against the floor and walks away, not responding as someone calls out, "Good job, Kevin."

◆

On the court or in practice, people see the number 13 who is running around, bumping chests with teammates and putting up three-pointer after three-pointer.

And they see the coach, solid and stern.

But when coach and player see each other as father and son, things change.

When his father has free time — and there's not much of that — he sits on the couch, eating potato chips and watching movies or something, Kevin said.

And he mows the lawn. "He loves cutting the lawn," Kevin said, smiling. "He gets on the riding mower and cuts the lawn; it's the greatest thing. He gets on me and wonders why I don't do it, but he loves it."

His father likes doing fix-it jobs around the house, little things to get away from basketball, Kevin said.

But "he never really gets away from it. He does not leave the job one second."

Kevin has known this about his father and basketball for some time.

"I remember my sophomore year they lost to Louisville," Kevin said. "I was going to sneak out of the house that night, but he did not go to sleep. I learned that after losses, he stays up watching film."

"I have a difficult time relaxing," Willard said. He looked out across his desk, which was piled with that morning's papers and other materials. "I can't go away on vacation and sit on a tropical island and read for 10 days. I'll never be able to relax and sit back."

On game days, he said, he can't eat because his stomach gets too upset. "Probably the person I admire most in basketball is Bill Russell," he said. "He told me that before every game, he threw up."

◆

Having his son play for him caused Willard even more concern. He repeatedly warned Kevin about playing for him.

Willard talked to Al McGuire, Jerry Tarkanian, Eddie Sutton and others who had coached their sons. "They all said it was extremely difficult," he said.

This is no longer like the youth leagues years ago, when Willard coached Kevin one basketball season, or even when Dottie coached one of his soccer teams and gave him pointers at the dinner table.

Willard told Kevin there would be times he would want the team mad at him, and that Kevin would have to go back to the team's dorm with a bunch of players angry at his father.

It didn't work. Kevin wanted to be here, and in September he got the call from his father to get ready to play.

During the season, they rarely see each other away from basketball, but "he's my son if he ever gets a bad grade back from his teachers," Willard said, smiling. At away games, the two avoid each other so outsiders won't suspect favoritism between father and son.

◆

Instead, Kevin thinks his father works him harder because of the family ties. "I think everyone expects that," he said.

Three years ago, Kevin spent many Friday nights alone in the Bowling Green High School gym, trying to adjust to a new city and new way of life. "I always felt like I had to work harder," he said. "Now I know I have to."

His father has always showed discipline, he said, but he never hit him or yelled. "The only thing he yells at me now for is not throwing a bounce pass," Kevin said.

But behind the whistle, the father still sees the son. "I've learned that maturity really doesn't have an age limit." Willard said. "He has an inner strength that he uses especially well in terms of dealing with other people.

"He's inspired me at times."

And seeing Kevin reminds him that not all of his goals are basketball-related.

"I'm still a parent," Willard said. "I have to work at being good."

◆

Of the Willards' three children, Kevin is the least like his father, and that's probably why they get along, Dottie said.

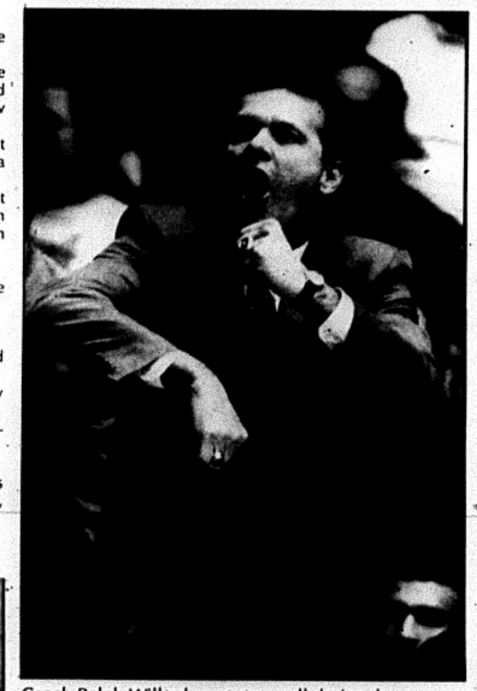
But both are intense. Both are more quiet than the rest of the family and are content to be by themselves.

And both have used basketball to adjust to changes in their lives — new teams, new cities, new faces.

Now they adjust to each other.

"There are so many words," Kevin said when trying to describe his father now. "Uplifting. Great, loving, caring, a pain in the butt. Yeah, definitely a pain in the butt.

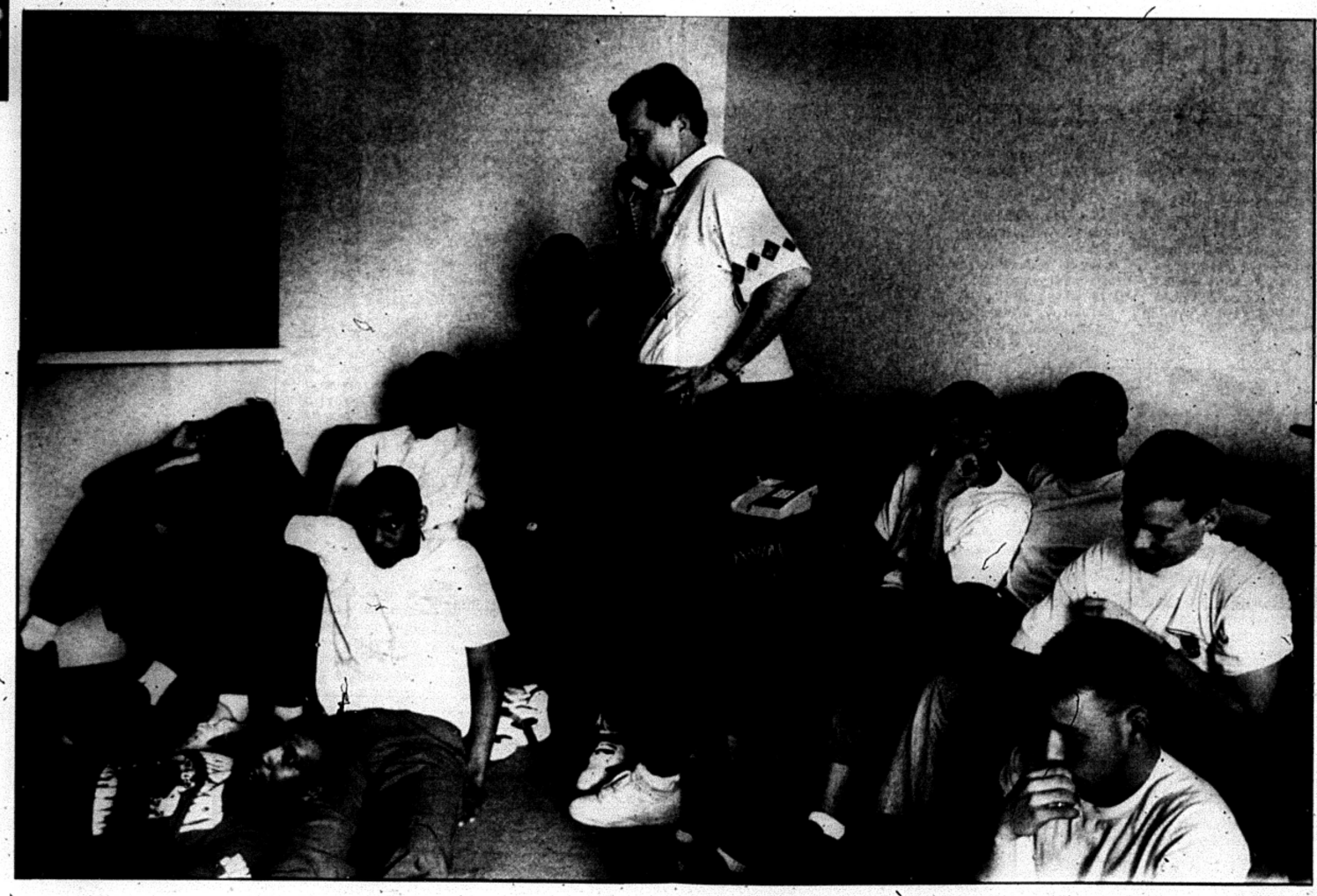
"He's everything I want a father to be."

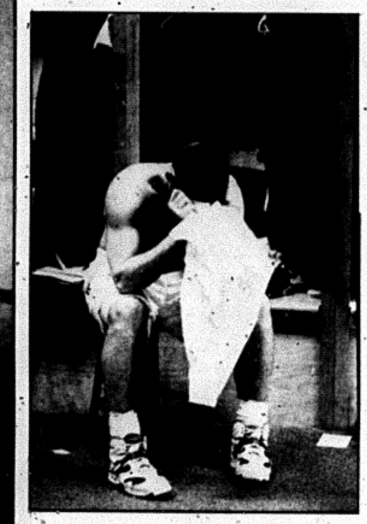


Coach Ralph Willard reacts to a call during the Jacksonville game at Diddle Arena.

"HE'S ONE OF my 13 sons. It's like a family."

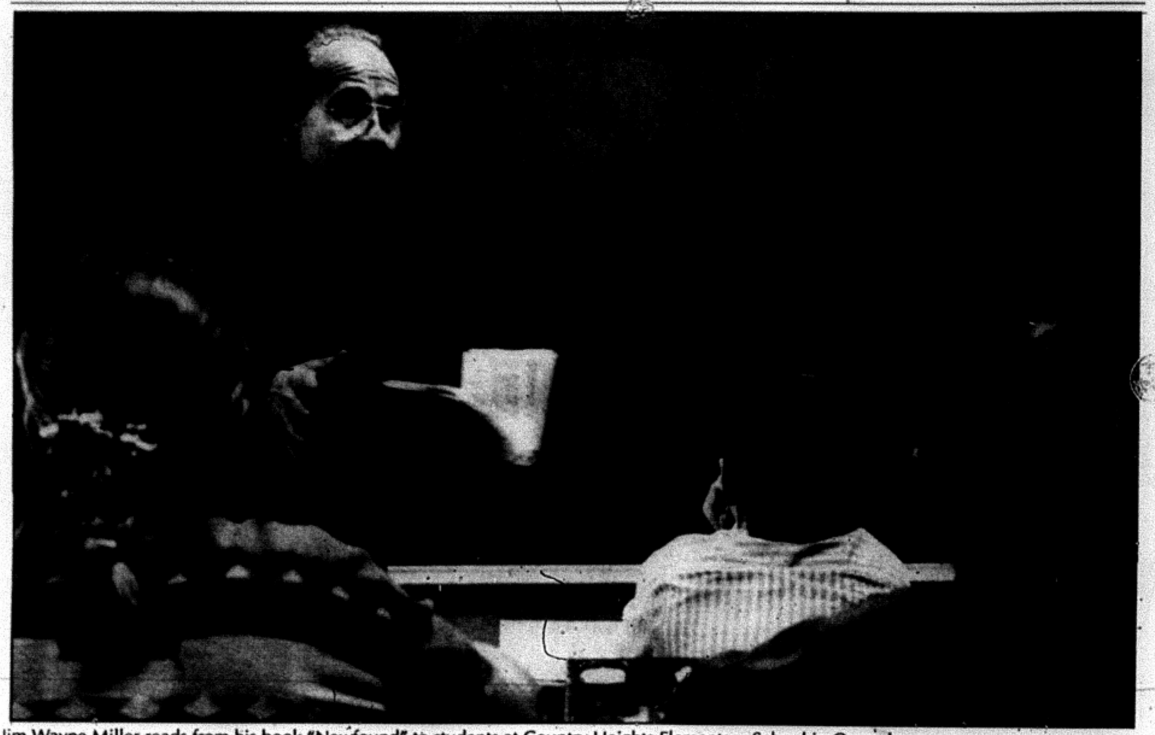
— RALPH WILLARD
MEN'S BASKETBALL COACH





TOP: After the Hilltoppers' 71-68 loss to the Kansas State Wildcats, Kevin Willard thought his performance was partially to blame. After the game, when the rest of the team went to Wendy's, Kevin lifted weights and worked out in the auxiliary gym beside Diddle Arena.

LEFT: While the team watches film from the Arkansas-Little Rock win and prepares for Arkansas State, Coach Ralph Willard pauses to take a call from Arkansas-Little Rock Coach Jim Platt.



Jim Wayne Miller reads from his book "Newfound" to students at Country Heights Elementary School in Owensboro.

GIVING THE GIFT TO OTHERS

A friend recently sent Jim Wayne Miller a newspaper clipping — a list of the 10 best sellers at a Pikeville bookstore. Miller's most recent book, "His First, Best Country," was on the list.

"There it was," Miller said. "Between 'The Billy Ray Cyrus Picture Album' and 'The Fat Gram Counter.'" He said he thought it was "a hoot."

For Miller's story — about a man's return to the Appalachian home where he lived simply — to be nestled between those books isn't so unusual. The incongruity, the discord of cultures, makes sense.

Like the main character in his novel, Miller is a mountain man. He grew up with his extended family in the Appalachian hills of Leicester, N.C., dancing to his uncle's fiddle playing, listening to his grandmother's story recitations.

He was a farm boy who milked cows and worked in fields of corn, potatoes and ever-important tobacco. In the forests, he chopped timber, hunted and fished with his father. During high school, Miller and a friend sold enough homemade moonshine to buy a car.

And it was in the hills of North Carolina where he began to write.

◆

Miller has taught German at Western for 31 years. Under the optional early retirement plan, he teaches only two classes now, but he's always busy. He remembers the earliest of his stories.

"In grade school, we would have a spelling lesson of 15 words," he said. "We'd have to use each word in a sentence and try to put them together to make a story. We'd have to imagine a situation or a subject. When one of my stories was published in the school newspaper, I remember one of my grandmothers asking me to bring it over. I thought, 'I'm very special' for her to ask me that. Then I found out she asked that of all her grandchildren."

Since the third grade, Miller has written seven collections of poetry, two novels and a play, all based in Appalachia.

"I've met people in some areas of the country where again and again the response is, 'I didn't know you could make poetry out of that.'"

Miller says though his writings take place in the mountains, readers everywhere probably face the same dilemmas as the characters.

"That's the circularity of material in a novel," he said. "When people in the same situation go into the book, they have awareness.

"A good piece of writing combines the particular and the universal," he said. "The universal exists in the particular. People need to experience the universal in particulars they are familiar with."

Miller is most familiar with his North Carolina home.

"Turn Your Radio On" (excerpt)
Sometimes he'd sit for hours
looking through a shoebox
of family photographs: his
grandfather leading a pair of
Walker
foxhounds; the old man atop a
boulder in the Bearwallow
holding his squirrel gun like a
walking stick, or on the porch
with his grandmother, both of
them sitting in the split-bot-
tom chairs.
Weathered and home-made
like the chairs they sat in, and
like the house
and barn, so comfortably in
place, they looked like one
another.
Something about the way they
sat spoke to him through his
own thoughts
all the way from the mountains,
like a powerful transmitter:
this place
belongs to us, their faces said,
and we belong to it.
When it's time, we come out
on this porch and take our ease,
and talk, as naturally as
treefrogs in the
poplars sing
toward dark.
— from "The Mountains Have Come Closer," Appalachian Consortium Press, 1980

Fifth graders in Cheryl Wagner's class at Country Heights Elementary School in Owensboro respond to Jim Wayne Miller's questions about poetry.

After graduating from Berea College, Miller studied German at Vanderbilt University and came to Bowling Green to teach in 1963. He's been at Western since, but his homeland hasn't excluded him.

"They claim me in two states," he said.

Claim him the Commonwealth does. In 1986 Miller was named poet laureate.

"It's first and foremost an honor and designation," Miller said. It requires few responsibilities, but "it puts you somewhat in demand to talk about Kentucky writing and writers.

"It's work, but it's pleasant work."

◆

Berea College President John Stephenson has known Miller for almost 30 years. Like Miller, Stephenson said he has also been working toward a more positive image for Appalachia.

"I was familiar with Miller's work long before I met him," said Stephenson, who is also from North Carolina. "We have been pen pals as long as we've known each other. We were interested in how we both approached the question of identity of the region."

Miller "can take what appears on the surface — the stereotype — and use it to elaborate a complex reality."

Stephenson mentioned Miller's "Brier hopper" poems about people from the Appalachian region who have moved away.

"If you didn't know anything about it, you would think, 'hick,'" he said. "But after reading his poems, you have been inside his mind, heard his voice. You've traveled along in the front seat with the character."

Stephenson said Miller's view on life in Appalachia is "one of affection, curiosity, puzzlement. It's hard to sum up his portrait of Appalachia.

"It's liking to a fly's eye; he sees things in 1,000 different ways. It's not the stereotypical view. He doesn't lend himself to the 'muddy gut' view, but he's not defensive either. He uses his imagination to help the

STORY BY ANYA L. ARMES

◆

PHOTOS BY TOR MATHIESEN

reader transcend the story, to understand the universal messages."

Loyal Jones, who retired in August from his position as head of Berea College's Appalachian Center, has known Miller for 35 years. Jones said Miller is "a spokesman for the Appalachian region. He's very scholarly and able to talk with all levels of people.

"He has a positive view of his own his culture and place — a positive attitude and view of the people. It's a wonderful gift."

Long View

Shooting over the highway at
Seventy miles an hour, he met
fenceposts and telephone
poles swishing
past in blurred panic, receding
in the rearview mirror, gone
like falling screams.

His heart, unhurried,
paced itself by those Kentucky
knobs
that kept the river and wide
bottomland between them
and never fell behind but followed
like a herd of graceful beasts
still undiscovered and
unnamed
they lived so deep inside the
continent.

— from "The Mountains Have Come Closer," Appalachian Consortium Press, 1980

Miller returns to Berea regularly for readings and workshops and always gets a good response, Stephenson said. But his visits are not limited to his alma mater. Another of Miller's roles is the "poet-in-school." He travels throughout the region, visiting elementary schools through colleges and helping students learn about writing.

Miller says he'll visit just about "anywhere I'm asked." Last week, he visited Owensboro's Country Heights Elementary School on the invitation of Western graduate Dennis Preston. Preston met Miller through English Professor Karen Pelz' graduate studies class in autobiographical studies last year.

"I invited him before I even knew he did this," he said.

Preston's class is reading Miller's book "Newfound," about a boy living with his family in the Appalachian mountains. Miller said the story is essentially autobiographical with a few changes. Miller is one of six children, but there are only three in the book. He just took his brothers and sisters and "folded them into the characters."

"What makes a poem?" Miller asked the fifth graders in Cheryl Wagner's class

"Rhythm!" one replied.

"Yes. Poems have rhythm."

"Music," another chimed.

"Rhythm makes music."

"Two lines together?"

"Poems can have verses."

"I want to suggest what makes a poem is imagination," he said. "You can have meter and verses but you don't always need them to express something."

Miller showed the students in Julia Hargan's fourth grade class an optical illusion — a picture portraying both an old and a young woman. Most of the students could see the old woman, but they had trouble seeing the young woman until Miller pointed out her features.

"Oh! I see it," said the students, excited in their discovery.

"You're doing it," Miller told them. "You're seeing the way things come together. You're using your imagination to see something in a different way. You use your imagination to solve problems."

Miller compared the picture to poetry.

"You can fade in and out on one image or the other, but you're incapable of seeing both at the same time."

Miller showed the children a passage from the Bible, Psalms 23:1: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

"This is a poem," Miller said. "When you have something that's difficult to understand and wanting to tell it to someone else, you use metaphors. You tell one thing in the terms of another. It's one little snapshot of one thing resembling another thing."

"I KEEP WAITING for him to write an opera. That's the only thing left for him."

— FRANK STEELE ENGLISH PROFESSOR

Miller spoke to seven fourth and fifth grade classes. He read from his book, "Newfound," and talked about poetry. He said he shows young students that anything can be the subject of a poem.

"I approach a poem as a natural object," he said. "Every poem is a made thing. We read it, we experience it. We let it work on us. We talk about how a poem is made, how we put them together."

Miller read the students a Tennessee poet's collection of "body poems." One of them, "Skeleton," was just one line:

On this jungle gym

"Your bones are like a jungle gym, with all your muscles sliding around," Miller told the students. "Poetry compresses. That's the nice thing about it, it suggests more than it actually says."

Before he left each classroom, Miller gave the students an assignment.

"I want you to write a poem, just a few lines, describing something," he said. "Your teacher will send them to me, and I'll send them back."

Within weeks the students at Country Heights Elementary School will get their writing back with remarks from the poet laureate.

"He's extremely kind and helpful — encouraging to young writers," said Miller's wife, Mary Ellen, also a writer and an English professor here. "He does so many workshops with all ages of students; he likes working with a wide range of people. He's generous with his time — sometimes too generous," she said, remarking that the two don't get to spend as much time together as she'd like. "I guess that's fairly standard for all couples."

Mary Ellen said she will sometimes proofread Miller's work for mistakes, but "One thing I won't ever do is type. He does all my typing. He's a great typist."

And though he has "incredible energy," Miller is a reserved person, Mary Ellen said. "He's notoriously reticent about his personal life," she said. "I wouldn't say Jim or any other writer was without an ego. He's not egoless, but he's not vain at all."

English Professor Frank Steele, Miller's friend for 30 years, said he has admired Miller's writing since reading his first book, "Copperhead Cane," a collection of poetry.

"His handling of images is dazzling," Steele said. "He has a strong sense of place, locale. That's a real asset for any writer."

Steele said Miller is "a guy who's written in every form except the opera. I keep waiting for him to write an opera. That's the only thing left for him."

Comparing it to a poem, Jim Wayne Miller shows students an optical illusion. Miller pointed out the features of both an old and a young woman in the drawing.

Pelz said she uses Miller's poetry in her creative writing classes.

"He has a great love of language," she said. "Just exactly the right word comes to him."

Pelz said that in a way, she wishes Miller were in the English department. "He has less time now," she said. "I've borrowed him several times and he's extremely gracious with his time."

Miller said his two studies, German and writing, mesh well.

"English is a German language," he said. "The study of both literatures is the same. The methodology is identical; you're just working in a different language."

And he doesn't regret not teaching English literature or creative writing at the college level.

"I've been comfortable," he said. "I don't like to write all day. I enjoy visiting writing classes, but only when I'm invited."

And when he's invited to schools and workshops, Miller will tell students that poetry isn't just about what was long ago and far away. He will tell students to value their own experiences. He will tell them they can write.

All writers are readers, he said.

"It's a process of emulation," he said. "You're just working from models," and adding your own experience.

"James Joyce went to Paris and to Switzerland, but he didn't write about them," he said. "He wrote about home. Someone else might try to write about Ireland. But they should write about their own equivalent of Ireland."